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The cannibals, the ancients, and cultural critique: Reading Montaigne in postmodern perspective*

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In spite of much argument and discussion, the concept of postmodernism seems to remain hopelessly ambiguous, and it seems still difficult to specify just what constitutes postmodernity and distinguishes it from the merely modern. The postmodern condition, as described in Jean-François Lyotard's rather dry narrative of the decline of classical metanarratives of legitimation, is the condition of knowledge in postindustrial societies where scientific research and knowledge, funded and controlled by the state and multinational corporations, engage in a language game of which the goal is "no longer truth, but performativity – that is, the best possible input/output equation" (Lyotard, 1984a:46). In societies of "perfect information" where data are in principle made accessible to any expert by advanced computer and telecommunication technologies, postmodern knowledge is characterized not by acquiring new facts, additional information, or truth, but by generating new paradigms, new and imaginative ways of arranging the data for better performance and efficiency. The question for today's "professionalist student, the State, or institutions of higher education," says Lyotard (1984a:51), is "no longer 'Is it true?' but 'What use is it?'" Or more directly, "Is it saleable?" "Is it efficient?"

It would be interesting to reflect whether such a disconcerting statement about the postmodern condition of knowledge applies to Lyotard's own text as well, since his text, as the author acknowledges, is commissioned by a government agency, "the Conseil des Universités of the government of Quebec" (Lyotard, 1984a:xxv). Indeed, considering Lyotard's report on the mercantilization and self-legitimation of knowledge in today's postmodern societies, one may wonder whether it is still possible at all for Lyotard to write *A Report on Knowledge* that can be valued for its information rather

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than imagination, for its reliability rather than saleability. Of course, questions like these hardly ever come up in the debate on postmodernism, but the irony is, though unintended, that Lyotard's report on postmodern condition cannot but implicate itself as knowledge disseminated under the same condition as he describes. At any rate, whether contemporary Western societies have reached the condition of "perfect information," – and there is some doubt about this (Connor, 1989:32–43), the postmodern condition as Lyotard describes is clearly a Western phenomenon and postmodernism, as Linda Hutcheon (1988:4) puts it, is "primarily European and American (North and South)."

If postmodernity refers to the situation of postindustrial societies in the West, postmodernism as a cultural concept designates, on the other hand, radical changes in ways of perception and representation, conceptual and stylistic transformations and fractures which have occurred in Western art and literature in the last fifty years. As Fredric Jameson argues in his at once supportive and contesting Foreword to Lyotard's book, concurrent with the decline of metanarratives that legitimate science by way of evidence and proof located in an objective reality outside the language of science, is the so-called "crisis of representation, in which an essentially realistic epistemology, which conceives of representation as the reproduction, for subjectivity, of an objectivity that lies outside it – projects a mirror theory of knowledge and art, whose fundamental evaluative categories are those of adequacy, accuracy, and Truth itself" (Jameson, 1984a:viii). This linkage of postmodernity conceived exclusively in terms of science and technology with a concept of postmodern culture and aesthetics, which Jameson finds regrettably lacking in Lyotard's book, serves to reformulate the question of the postmodern both historically and politically, since for Jameson the "problem of postmodernism is at one and the same time an aesthetic and a political one" (Jameson, 1988, 2:103). The turn to the aesthetic is politically significant because, according to Jameson, the experimental art of the avant-garde, the self-conscious new forms of high modernism embody a politicized aesthetics, "the conception of the revolutionary nature of high modernism that Habermas faithfully inherited from the Frankfurt School" (Jameson, 1984a:xvi; see, Shusterman, 1989). In opposition to popular taste and accepted values of a philistine society, the avant-garde art of high modernism has an almost inherently revolutionary potential, while postmodernism, understood as a reaction against modernism and producing, however ironically and paralogically, "new conflation of the forms of high and mass culture," is "no longer at all 'oppositional' in that sense; indeed it constitutes the pervasive hegemonic aesthetic of consumer society and significantly serves the latter's commodity production" (Jameson, 1988, 2:195–196). By linking up postmodernism with

modernism, though not in a strictly chronological order, Jameson is able to historicize postmodernism and to conceive of postmodernity as a late stage of capitalism rather than a totally new social order, and therefore a social structure that can still be analyzed in classical Marxist terms, "as indices of a new and powerful, original, global expansion of capitalism, which now specifically penetrates the hitherto precapitalist enclaves of Third World agriculture and of First World culture, in which, in other words, capital more definitively secures the colonization of Nature and the Unconscious" (Jameson, 1984a:xiv). In view of this global expansion of capitalism, then, postmodernism would not be just European and American but also implicates the Third World and its non-Western cultural manifestations.

Jameson's argument is richly suggestive for the three aspects just mentioned above, namely, the historicization of postmodernism, the turn to the aesthetic, and the cultural interplay between the Western world and the Third World. Putting the three aspects together, one may raise some questions about postmodernism as a cultural concept. If postmodernism can be historicized and related with the past, what can then be identified as its historical antecedents? What relationship obtains between the postmodern moment as a Western phenomenon and the non-Western (Third World) Other? By calling attention to Lyotard's own reflection on postmodernist culture, which is included in the English version of Lyotard's book as an appendix, Jameson (1984a:xvi) notes that Lyotard himself is "quite unwilling to posit a postmodernist stage radically different from the period of high modernism and involving a fundamental historical and cultural break with this last." What is *post*-modern indicates a paradox in social and cultural changes, for the displacement of what goes before, the kind of Oedipal relationship between successive generations of poets and artists, which Harold Bloom calls the anxiety of influence, is especially visible in the transformation of art from the modern to the postmodern. Such a relationship, as Lyotard recapitulates it, runs through the history of art from the Impressionists to Cézanne, from Cézanne to Picasso and Braque, from Picasso and Braque to Marcel Duchamp, and from Duchamp to Daniel Buren: "In an amazing acceleration, the generations precipitate themselves. A work can become modern only if it is first postmodern. Postmodernism thus understood is not modernism at its end but in the nascent state, and this state is constant" (Lyotard, 1984b:79). Postmodernism thus becomes synonymous with a constant search for the ever new, the breaking of existent boundaries of the known, the same, the self, and at the same time a strong desire to reach out to the unknown, the different, the unpresentable Other. In this respect, then, postmodernism seems to preserve much of the radical, if not revolutionary, nature of high modernism, and the attitude postmodernism maintains toward the past, especially in its various theoreti-

cal formulations, is a fundamentally critical one. To the extent that everything modern is already superseded by something that comes after it, postmodernity appears to be symptomatic of an extreme impatience in the psychosocial condition of contemporary Western culture, in which the notion of the traditional timeless classic is threatened to be supplanted by Andy Warhol's proverbial fifteen-minute fame, and the need to make something new and militantly avant-garde becomes in itself the aim of artistic creation. Postmodernism seems impatient of what was or has been in the past, and yet, insofar as the search for ways of presenting the new and the unpresentable characterizes the postmodern desire, postmodernism does not belong exclusively to the present; that is to say, it is not without historical precedents.

Like any other cultural movement or tendency, postmodernism is situated in its own historicity and should be understood, again as Lyotard (1984b:81) remarks, "according to the paradox of the future (*post*) anterior (*modo*)." This temporal paradox projects postmodernity as a concept from the immediate present onto a much larger conceptual space and relates it to those moments in the past that were also in search of what was once new. Lyotard (1984b:81) exemplifies this paradox by making the surprising remark that "the essay (Montaigne) is postmodern, while the fragment (*The Athaeneum*) is modern." Seeing postmodernism as an ironic revisit of the past and ironic use of the already used language to present what cannot otherwise be presented, Umberto Eco also defines postmodernism as an ahistorical "ideal category – or, better still, a *Kunstwollen*, a way of operating" not limited to a particular period of time. If postmodernism can be so defined, Eco (1984:66,68) continues, "it is clear why Sterne and Rabelais were postmodern, why Borges surely is, and why in the same artist the modern moment and the postmodern moment can coexist, or alternate, or follow each other closely."

But in what sense can we say Montaigne is postmodern? How does his essay partake of the desire and strategies we call postmodern? What are the shared concerns in Montaigne and in the writings of postmodernism? Taking Lyotard's remark as a starting point, I shall explore the implications of the temporal paradox of the "future (*post*) anterior (*modo*)," and understand postmodernism not as uniquely of the present moment but as rooted in other moments of cultural critique, i.e., the critique of the self and of subjectivity, which constitutes the driving force that lies at the heart of both modernist and postmodernist transformations. I shall argue that the questioning of the self with regard to the Other forms an important aspect of the common ground on which Montaigne's essay and postmodernist writings can be seen as commensurate.

It is a critical commonplace that Montaigne in his *Essays* is concerned

with the problem of knowing the self, but he is concerned not so much with his own self as the self of a more general nature, for the subject of his study is not himself as such but is man.[1] Needless to say, the self or the concept of man in his writings is culturally specific, that is, conceived within the range of Western culture which Montaigne inherits most consciously by copiously citing classical writers whose works constitute the Western tradition. In his quest of the essence of man, however, Montaigne starts and proceeds by putting that essence in question. The pervasive and healthy skepticism, clearly demonstrated in his *Essays* and his famous motto – *Que sais-je?* – reveals a profound sense of change and transformation, a sense of the limit and uncertainty of the knowledge of man. The uncertainty or "crisis" of identity is of course a typical postmodern question. As Lyotard observes, the question raised by much of contemporary art, the challenge of works like Duchamp's "ready made" art objects to aesthetic theory, is not "What is beautiful?" but "What can be said to be art (and literature)?" (Lyotard, 1984a:75). In the postmodernist aesthetics, the very identity of a work of art becomes a question the work raises about itself, a question that does not seem to arise in the traditional aesthetics of the beautiful. The blurring of boundaries between art and non-art, fiction and reality, and the deliberate breach of traditional norms of the beautiful and the artistic have pushed the postmodernist work into an identity crisis in which, as Hans Robert Jauss argues, the *poiesis* and *aesthesis*, or the creative and the receptive sides of the aesthetic experience, are increasingly mixed up and consequently the viewer or the reader "is called upon to decide whether this can *still* or *also* claim to be art" (Jauss, 1982:57). No longer grounded in the authorial subjectivity but shaped by individual viewers or readers from their changing perspectives, the identity of the work of art becomes as a result indeterminate.

Uncertainty or indeterminacy, we may recall, is the first of eleven "definiens" on Ihab Hassan's "paratactic list" of postmodern features (Hassan, 1986:504). Such uncertainties and indeterminacies are very much at the center of Montaigne's *Essays* and their general theme – the problematic of knowing the self, and his pre-Cartesian skepticism seems to reveal an attitude extremely congenial to the contemporary critique of Cartesian subjectivity and rationalism. Norman Holland maintains that the identity problem also marks the advent of postmodern psychoanalysis, the crucial moment when "Freud's *intra*psychic picture of the mind" has given way to an "*inter*psychic model," in which the self is understood not as an autonomous entity like a High Modern text but intersubjectively, in an intricate nexus of relationships with the Other. "The most personal, central thing I have, my identity," says Holland (1983:300,304–305) "is not in me but in your interaction with me or in a divided me. We are always in

relation. We are among. Whereas psychoanalysis began as a science of human individuality within each human skin, Postmodern psychoanalysis is the study of human individuality as it exists *between* human skins." For a postmodern analyst, as for Montaigne four centuries ago, the identity of the self is understood only through its interactions with others; it is defined, much in the same way as a linguistic sign, with regard to other identities in mutual differentiation. Therefore, to see Montaigne as a precursor of postmodernism is not as anachronistic as it appears at first blush, and it is perfectly justifiable to situate postmodernity in other times and other locales if only because the postmodern desire for the new and the unprecedented is at the same time a desire for the Other, a desire clearly revealed in Montaigne's *Essays*.

Let us recall that the word *essai*, as Montaigne used it, did not signify an established literary genre but an experiment, a new way of writing in which he tested the concept, the language, and the components of the self. His was the time when some of the most important experiments in history were being carried out, when old beliefs were shaken by the Copernican revolution and the discovery of the New World, and when the horizon of the Western man was expanding rapidly, whereas the limitation of his knowledge and capacity was inevitably brought to his critical consciousness. "Why do we not remember how much contradiction we sense even in our own judgment? How many things were articles of faith to us yesterday, which are fables to us today?" thus Montaigne describes the fast pace of dynamic changes in his time (Montaigne, 1958, 1.27:135). Like Socrates, he lays emphasis on the importance of the "consciousness of our ignorance and weakness" (Montaigne, 1958, 1.27:133), and argues that it is wise as is necessary to give up one's established opinions, to abandon accepted "limits of truth and falsehood" (Montaigne, 1958, 1.27:134). Like the postmodern rejection of a realistic epistemology, Montaigne's willingness to abandon established notions of truth and falsehood is based on his realization that any grasp or comprehension of reality is mediated through the apparatus of thinking and language which operates, mostly and for most of the time, by applying to each situation what can only be described as norms, formulas, and conventions. "We are nothing but ceremony," says Montaigne (1958, 2.17:478), "ceremony carries us away, and we leave the substance of things." The contrast between convention and reality here evinces Montaigne's sober recognition of human knowledge as structured information, determined by what is conventionally held as true or false, right or wrong, and so forth. But once the conventional nature and limitation of knowledge are exposed, self-complacency is no longer possible. "I am as doubtful of myself as of anything else," he (1958, 2.17:480) says, and his relentless quest for the truth of the self leads him into the wilderness of

doubt, the agonizing yet exhilarating experience of self-questioning. But it also leads to a fascination with "far-off governments, customs, and languages," a fascination with whatever is unknown and unfamiliar (Mongtaigne, 1958, 2.17:480). All that is known to us "would be less than nothing compared with what is unknown," Montaigne argues. "If we saw as much of the world as we do not see, we would perceive, it is likely, a perpetual multiplication and vicissitude of forms" (Montaigne, 1958, 3.6:692–693). With such awareness of the limitation of one's own knowledge and values, Montaigne endeavors to go beyond the boundary of European culture and to understand sympathetically what seems to be the strange, the non-European Other.

In a reading of Montaigne with special reference to the relationship between the self and the Other, Tzvetan Todorov (1983:118) argues that Montaigne's "radical relativism" leads him to "the two great politico-ethical opinions," that is, "conservatism at home, toleration for others." Todorov's argument, however, aims to expose Montaigne as a universalist who imposes his own values and value judgment on others rather than taking the position of a real relativist who accepts the Other on its own ground. "Confronted with the other, Montaigne is undeniably moved by a generous impulse: rather than despise him, he admires him, and he never tires of criticizing his own society." But, asks Todorov (1983:125), "does the other receive his due from this little game? It is doubtful. The positive value judgment is founded on a misunderstanding and on the projection upon the other of an image of the self – or more precisely – of an ideal Ego (*idéal du moi*), incarnated for Montaigne by Greek civilization. The other is never apprehended, never known." According to Todorov (1983:127, 135), Montaigne uses Greek civilization as his universal yardstick to measure everything that belongs to the Other; what appear to be his open-minded magnanimity and acceptance of the Other thus turn out to be "a detailed plea for the autonomy of the subject," a plea for the self conceived totally within limits of Western culture and leading "directly to individualism and egoism." Montaigne's self defines and manipulates the Other rather than being defined with regard to the Other, and what seems a self-critique is in fact a disguised self-assertion, a deceptive kind of paranoia. In Todorov's portraiture, therefore, Montaigne eventually comes out as a bad "unconscious universalist," one who "pretends to be a relativist," whose tolerance of different social and cultural values is in fact "an indifference to values, a refusal to enter the world of others" (Todorov, 1983:125, 126).

Todorov's debunking of Montaigne as one of the early thinkers who anticipated the postmodern desire for the Other raises a significant question. It is not so much a question about Montaigne's intention or consciousness as one about the way in which a relationship can be established between the

self and the Other, and about the function of Montaigne's sympathetic view of the Other. To be sure, when Montaigne argues for the acceptance of alien customs and values, he often does so by referring to historical precedents in the Western tradition, especially examples recorded in Greek and Roman antiquity. This can be seen clearly in "Of cannibals," an essay Todorov also discusses at length, in which Montaigne reflects on the character and customs of the natives in the "newly discovered" Brazil. By choosing the New World aborigine cannibals as his topic, Montaigne puts into question the quintessential idea in all discussions of culture, namely, the very definition of the civilized and its necessary opposite, the barbarous (*barbare*) or the savage (*sauvage*). All these words are used and examined in Montaigne's essay, and each of them is given an unconventional meaning, or rather, the conventional meaning of each is seriously questioned and invalidated.

The essay begins with an anecdote that bears on the relationship between the civilized and the barbarian not with direct reference to the Brazilians but indirectly, by reflecting on the meaning of barbarity as used by the Greeks with regard to the Romans. The real Other – in this case the native Brazilians – is yet undefined and therefore unpresentable; the only way to speak of that Other, as Montaigne demonstrates, is by means of analogy and historicization, in terms of what has been appropriated in the tradition of Western culture. The only language available is the language of the self, which for Montaigne is historically meaningful, originating from classical antiquity. Thus, instead of speaking of the New World cannibals, Montaigne first examines the original meaning of the word "barbarian" as used by King Pyrrhus who exclaimed, when deeply impressed by the well-disciplined phalanxes of the Roman army, "'I do not know what barbarians these are' (for so the Greeks called all foreign nations), 'but the formation of this army that I see is not at all barbarous.'" This anecdote immediately brings the word "barbarian" to its Greek origin, its etymological sense which does not, Montaigne suggests, carry the derogatory meaning usually attached to it in popular usage. From this, Montaigne (1958, 1.31:150) remarks, "we should beware of clinging to vulgar opinions, and judge things by reason's way, not by popular say." It is thus by a critique of language that Montaigne prepares the reader for a new way of speaking of the undefined Other, a new language in which words like "barbarian" and "barbarity" may turn out to be something very different from what they signify in conventional usage.

Throughout the essay, Montaigne tries to undo the conventional way of speaking of the Other by further developing the discrepancy between the etymological sense of "barbarian" as simply "foreign" and the cultural notion of "barbarian" or "barbarous" as "uncivilized." Both meanings exist

in Montaigne's essay as he (1958, 1.31:152) writes:

> I think there is nothing barbarous and savage in that nation, from what I have been told, except that each man calls barbarism whatever is not his own practice; for indeed it seems we have no other test of truth and reason than the example and pattern of the opinions and customs of the country we live in.

For Montaigne, the anecdote clearly shows that we all live in an enclosure of accepted opinions, customs, conventions, or to put it in a modern idiom, a prison-house of language. By bringing to consciousness this imprisonment, however, he aims precisely to break out of it by challenging conventional meaning and usage, by expanding his horizon of knowledge to embrace the New World not just geographically but conceptually as well. He suggests that the discrepancy between "barbarian" as simply "foreign" and "barbarian" as "uncivilized," which already exists in King Pyrrhus's comment on the Romans, has increasingly aggravated in the history of Western civilization, which is at the same time a history of the corruption of nature by culture, reflected in the corruption of language itself. The semantic shift of the word "barbarian" from a more "natural" and descriptive term into a culturally loaded one is a manifestation of the corruption of language. That is to say, Montaigne uses a sort of counter narrative of the degeneration of language and civilization to facilitate his critique of the familiar metanarrative of Western cultural progress, and in that critique the Brazilian cannibals function as a shock force to subvert and shatter familiar cultural values and conventional usage of language. Todorov is quite right to observe that Montaigne has "a unique scheme at his disposal" in outlining this history of degeneration: "Originally, man was natural; during his history, he has become more and more artificial (Todorov, 1983:123)." This implied narrative of degeneration makes it possible for Montaigne to unite the Greeks, who represent the very origin of Western civilization, and the New World cannibals, who stand in opposition to that civilization. Since the ancient Greeks lived in a time more natural than the present, they could have understood the natural condition of the native Brazilians better than the moderns. It is a pity that "Lycurgus and Plato did not know of them," says Montaigne (1958, 1.31:153), "for it seems to me that what we actually see in these nations surpasses not only the pictures in which poets have idealized the golden age and all their inventions in imagining a happy state of man, but also the conceptions and the very desire of philosophy."

When nature is privileged over culture, the Brazilians are found superior not only to modern Europeans but also to the ancient Greeks, and the Greeks, being closer to the natural condition, are in turn superior to the

moderns. In their propinquity to pure naturalness, the Greeks and the native Brazilians have more in common with each other than with the modern Europeans. Even the horror of cannibalism, the ultimate sign of the barbarous Other, so Montaigne argues, is not unknown to the Greeks and the ancient French, since "Chrysippus and Zeno, heads of the Stoic sect, thought there was nothing wrong in using our carcasses for any purpose in case of need, and getting nourishment from them; just as our ancestors, when besieged by Caesar in the city of Alésia, resolved to relieve their famine by eating old men, women, and other people useless for fighting" (Montaigne, 1958, 1.31:155). The courage and unconquerable spirit of the cannibals are compared to King Leonidas at the pass of Thermopylae, their polygamy is justified by citing biblical and classical parallels, and their love song is found to be "altogether Anacreontic" (Montaigne, 1958, 1.31:158). One may object to such an argument, as Todorov does, that Montaigne uses Greek precedents to absorb the Other, but it is not very persuasive to say that Montaigne is neither interested in the Other nor cognizant of its integrity. On the contrary, it is possible to argue that for Montaigne the Greeks and the Brazilians, the self and the Other, are not positioned at the two poles of an absolute and mutually exclusive opposition; that he is not, after all, confined in what Todorov (1983:118) calls an "all-or-nothing alternative." In putting the ancient Greeks and contemporary New World cannibals together under the rubric of naturalness, Montaigne is using an old rhetorical strategy, namely, the topos that connects, as Victor Segalen (1978:13) puts it, "the remote in the past (historicism) and the far-off in space (exoticism)." In Montaigne's essay, the Greeks and the cannibals come to share the same side of superior nature, whereas the modern Europeans are left on the other side, alienated from naturalness by the very culture that claims to lord over the "barbarians" not as "foreign" but as the "uncivilized."

It is obvious even in a casual reading that the meaning of "barbarian" constantly changes throughout Montaigne's essay, and that its conventional usage is always put in question. Edwin Duval (1983:95–112) identifies five different and contradictory perspectives from which "barbarism" in Montaigne's essay undergoes a shift of meaning. Michel de Certeau also notes that Montaigne highlights the inadequacy of the conventional usage of "barbarian" in three ways: "an ambivalence (cannibals are 'barbarian' because of their 'original naturalness'; Occidentals are barbarian because of their cruelty); a comparison (our ways are more barbarian than theirs); and an alternative (one of us has to be barbarian, us or them, and it's not them)," which finally designate "us" as the real barbarians. Montaigne's performance, Certeau (1986:73) concludes, is thus "a critique of language, carried out in the name of language and nothing else." But if the semantic shift of

the word "barbarian" is tied to an attitude always favorable toward the Brazilians, Montaigne's essay must offer more than a critique of language, or rather his critique of language must indicate at the same time a cultural critique, a critique of the Western self and the cultural values that constitute it. J. M. Blanchard considers the essay on cannibals part of Montaigne's meditation on the problem of autobiography, "a problem which arises when and where the consciousness of a difference between what constitutes the self and what constitutes the other remains unclear" (Blanchard, 1978:654). Again, it is necessary to emphasize that what is at stake in Montaigne's essay is not just writing of the self but self-critique in examining one's own cultural values vis-à-vis the Other.

Indeed, it is this cultural critique that underlies and determines the change of perspectives in Montaigne's essay. As Duval (1983:102) comments, "despite this disconcerting flux in value and point of view, no reader of the essay has ever failed to notice that Montaigne's judgment of the Brazilian natives themselves remains steadfastly favorable from beginning to end." Once we realize the purported social and cultural critique in Montaigne's essay, the vagaries of its changing argumentation become rather understandable as they fall into a simple pattern that assigns positive values to the ancient Greeks and contemporary New World cannibals, while depriving the modern Europeans of their pride and self-complacency. When the word "barbarian" or "savage" is shown to be positive rather than negative, it is always used to refer to the Brazilians, but when the word is used in its pejorative sense, it designates the condition of modern Europeans. Thus, Montaigne argues that the cannibals can be called wild only in the sense that they are purely natural, that "the laws of nature still rule them, very little corrupted by ours" (Montaigne, 1958, 1.31:153). Their practice of cannibalism is indeed barbarous, but they at least eat men when they are dead, while in Europe there is "more barbarity in eating a man alive" (Montaigne, 1958, 1.31:155). Toward the end of the essay, conventional meanings and values are completely overturned as "cannibals" prove to be less barbarous than the "civilized," and the Europeans, Montaigne (1958, 1.31:156) insists, surpass the cannibals "in every kind of barbarity". The entire essay, as Todorov (1983:122) concludes correctly, "is in fact a praise of the 'cannibals' and a condemnation of our society."

In Montaigne's essay, the Brazilian cannibals evidently serve a polemical purpose: the Other is evoked not for its own sake but for the critique of the self by the self. In presenting the cannibals as superior in their naturalness to cultured Europeans, Montaigne, as Todorov (1983:123) remarks, is indeed creating a myth, "the myth of the noble savage." Eventually, therefore, it is the Western self that resides at the polemical center of the essay, around which the whole argument is methodically organized, while

the Other, as Todorov (1983:125) complains, is "never apprehended, never known." But if Montaigne uses the Other as a mere instrument for self-knowledge or self-critique, does that make his essay essentially different from the de-centered postmodernist writings and theories? The answer, I would say, is emphatically negative. Instead of seeing Montaigne as a universalist whose philosophy differs from a postmodern relativist, I would argue that the use of a non-Western Other for a critique of the Western self is precisely what makes Montaigne a precursor of postmodernism, and that Todorov's relativist who "does not judge others" does not yet exist (Todorov, 1983:125).[2] The postmodern condition in Lyotard's description is a condition of difference and heterogeneity, which manifests itself in the dissolution of every kind of totalizing narrative, the waning of the cultural authority of the West, and the celebration of all sorts of cultural and ethnic differences. For such a condition, for "such a situation of 'pure difference'," as Steven Conner (1989:9) argues, Michel Foucault's *heterotopia* provides "the most famous image," "a name for the whole centreless universe of the postmodern."

We may recall that "heterotopia" is the name Foucault gives to the inconceivable space inscribed in a certain "Chinese encyclopaedia," found in one of Borges's postmodern "essays," where strange and strangely categorized animals can be put together in one locale despite radical incommensurability and according to an absurdly illogical method of classification which reveals, so Foucault (1973:xv) claims, a totally different way of thinking and speaking, "another system of thought." As I have argued elsewhere, the hilarious passage from the so-called "Chinese encyclopaedia" is in fact a Western fiction, and in citing that fictitious "Chinese encyclopaedia" as a metaphor of an exotic, non-Western Other whose conceptual monstrosity threatens to destroy the usual categories of thinking and naming in language, Foucault is also creating a myth, a cultural myth of the Other whose function in postmodernist theories is completely manipulated and determined by the interest of the Western self (see Zhang, 1988). In other words, like Montaigne, contemporary Western savants often evoke the Other to set off whatever is considered as the Western self; and their sometimes sympathetic view of the Other, again like Montaigne's view of the Brazilian cannibals, is eventually determined by their critical view of the self and traditional Western values.

Even Lyotard's report on knowledge in the highly developed Western societies at the postmodern moment would be incomplete without evoking an image of the Other at a clearly premodern moment – a Cashinahua storyteller, whose ritualistic narrative formulae provide a model of the pragmatics and self-legitimation of narrative knowledge, which is said to be incommensurate to the classical Western conception of scientific

knowledge but to which the entire postmodern scientific and cultural discourse ironically returns (Lyotard, 1984a:20–23). But, one may ask, what is that Cashinahuan storyteller doing in a report on the postmodern condition of contemporary Western societies? What function does he perform in Lyotard's text except that of an instrument of illustration? As usual, the Other is evoked for a purpose and the heterotopia is created only to be metaphorically colonized from the very start. As Conner (1989:9) remarks in his insightful comment on this Western creation of the myth of the Other: "once such a heterotopia has been named, and, more especially, once it has been cited and re-cited, it is no longer the conceptual monstrosity which it once was, for its incommensurability has been in some sense bound, controlled and predictively interpreted, given a centre and illustrative function." In fact, the heterotopia has never been really the conceptual monstrosity Foucault claims it to be; the inconceivable heterotopia or the incommensurate Other is conceived, after all, by and for the Western self, and therefore it is contained at the very moment when it is created. However positively presented or represented, the Other in postmodernist discourse performs a predictable role, an assigned function of an oppositional system of thought, language, or value, and its containment ironically makes the discourse of postmodernism a totalizing force which it purports to deconstruct. Thus Conner (1989:9–10) continues:

> Something similar can be said to happen repeatedly in postmodernist theory, or theory of postmodernism, which names and correspondingly closes off the very world of cultural difference and plurality which it allegedly brings to visibility. What is striking is precisely the degree of consensus in postmodernist discourse that there is no longer any possibility of consensus, the authoritative announcements of the disappearance of final authority and the promotion and recirculation of a total and comprehensive narrative of a cultural condition in which totality is no longer thinkable.

By positing a number of concepts and ideas and claiming their absolute validity, the "total and comprehensive narrative" of postmodernist theory becomes itself a totalizing discourse, a new hegemonic master narrative of the West which defines and produces the terms in which critical discourse is conducted, which determines what is centrality and what is marginality, and what relationship sustains between the two. Insofar as the Other is not allowed to speak for itself but is defined and spoken of only in the interest of the Western self – even though for the express purpose of a self-critique – all the emphasis on difference and heterogeneity tends to lose its efficacy despite good intentions and genuine concerns. Todorov's severe criticism of Montaigne can in this sense be taken as a sober admonition, and there have been other voices of critique coming from different quarters of the critical

scene, from what has been perceived to be the marginalized Other.

One example is Rey Chow's objection to Jameson's mapping of postmodernism as cultural manifestation of the global expansion of capitalism which now includes the Chinese in Taiwan, a complaint about the contours of a new global culture which, Jameson claims, "can no longer be considered a purely Western export but may be expected to characterize at least certain other local zones of reality around the capitalist world" (Jameson, 1984b:26 as quoted in Chow, 1986–1987:69). The details of Rey Chow's objection and argument – that Jameson has inappropriately "reordered modern Chinese literature," that he has misidentified certain Chinese writers as exponents of realism, modernism, and postmodernism, and that certain popular narratives known as "Mandarin Ducks and Butterflies" literature are "jointly produced by foreign imperialism and native scholastic elitism," and so forth (Chow, 1986–1987:70, 89) – are by no means incontestable, and the phenomenally enthusiastic reception of Jameson's theory in both Chinese mainland and Taiwan cannot be dismissed as a mere intellectual fashion with no specific cultural and political reasons. The way Rey Chow positions herself against a global mapping of postmodernism, however, brings us to the point concerning the function of the Other in postmodernist theories. The very "emergence of the 'Third World' as a viable critical signifier," she argues, must be understood in the light of the current self-critique of the West and its desire to find alternative perspectives in the non-Western Other. Insofar as Western theory claims the non-Western world as a "resourceful" territory, says Chow (1986–1987:91), then Western theory, "in spite of its original liberating intentions, is complicitous with the historical 'First World' desire to use the non-West to supply its 'lack' in so many different ways." Thus from the vantage point of the Other, Rey Chow contests the very concept of the Other in Western theoretical formulations of postmodernism: "This 'lack' is often eulogized as the 'Other': as woman, primitive nature, spiritual beyond. In each case the non-west receives full credit as alternative *representational principle*, while the 'hegemonic' West continues to balance such acts of metaphysical generosity with the most pragmatic discriminations and miscomprehensions" (Chow, 1986–1987:91).

It can be argued that Chow's critique is somewhat misplaced on Jameson, whose effort to locate contemporary Chinese literature in the mapping of a global postmodernist culture does not participate in mystifying China as an exotic, alternative, or unpresentable Other. The metaphor of mapping with its implications of center and periphery, however, easily lends itself to the critique Rey Chow vigorously pursues here. The question she raises about the possible solution to the problem of ethnocentrism, which is for her implicit in the metaphor of global mapping, is certainly

worth pondering. "Is the cultural historian condemned to ethnocentrism," she (1986–1987:92) asks, "in that he or she either has to reduce the 'alien' to some culture-bound total vision, or else become utterly incapacitated by the ever-multiplying otherness of even his or her 'own' world?" Rey Chow (1986–1987:93) opts for "the use of history as a continuous *confrontation* with precisely these two impossible ends of totality and difference." A perhaps less contentious and more constructive model would be an open-ended dialogue, the kind of dialogue that develops not to seal the question with an authoritative answer but to open the horizon of the question and questioning, a true dialogue that seeks not to consolidate but to eliminate the ethnocentric lines, to transcend the rigid boundaries between the self and the Other, and to discover a shared ground on which exchange and communication become possible.

But is there any possibility of a shared ground, any ground? The postmodernist pronouncement about the demise of classical metanarratives, the emphasis on difference and heterogeneity, seem to render any sharing of value or consensus very difficult, if not completely impossible. In this connection, I want to cite yet another example to demonstrate how the hitherto repressed and oppressed voices of the Other need to reject some of the dominant postmodernist concepts in order to speak for themselves. Henry Louis Gates, Jr., certainly one of the most eloquent voices speaking for a distinct tradition of African–American literature, calls "race" a dangerous metaphor, "the ultimate trope of difference" that does not correspond to reality or an ontological essence. To use language carelessly as though racial difference is a "natural" given, says Gates (1985:5), "is to engage in a pernicious act of language, one which exacerbates the complex problem of cultural or ethnic difference, rather than to assuage or redress it." In quite the same spirit as Martin Luther King's famous "I Have a Dream" speech, Gates (1985:13) emphasizes "the basis of a shared humanity" as the cultural value too precious to be yielded by *inscribing* "race" as an essence. Racial discrimination, the vice and violence that infect almost all modern nations, thrives precisely on the pernicious act of language that internalizes and naturalizes racial difference while denying any shared humanity. In this connection, then, we may recognize a virtue in Montaigne's essay on the cannibals that is rarely found in postmodernist discourse on the Other, namely, the virtue of *reconstituting* humanity as shared by the cannibals and the Greeks, the self and the Other. As Blanchard observes, in reading this essay, one is struck by Montaigne's repeated assertion that "far from being strange, [the cannibals], more than we perhaps, are plain ordinary folk" (Blanchard, 1978:658). To *prescribe* and *fix* the Other as pure difference, as strange and grotesque animals roaming about an unthinkable heterotopia, which is the image of the Other

we find in much of postmodernist as well as traditional Western discourse, is the ultimate source of racism and ethnocentrism, the source of dangerous thinking that produces arbitrary differences between whites and blacks, men and women, East and West, etc., a source of evil that must be eradicated.

Paradoxically, however, it is only by allowing different voices of the heretofore marginalized and unrepresented Other to speak for themselves that the myth of the Other can be demythologized and the shared humanity can be revealed. To accept uncritically the traditional Western discourse of a universal human nature or contemporary Western theory of an irreducible difference is to continue keeping the voices of the Other muffled and the marginalized on the same margin as long as the master discourse of the West continues to define the terms and decide what should be the appropriate way of "doing criticism." As Gates (1985:15) puts it succinctly: "To attempt to appropriate our own discourses by using Western critical theory uncritically is to substitute one mode of neocolonialism for another."

The critic or the cultural historian, to come back to Rey Chow's question about ethnocentrism, need not be condemned to a binary opposition of totality and difference. Indeed, the question needs to be rephrased in terms of specific cultural values and shared human values, in terms, again, of the self and the Other. And the answer to such a question is not to seal the question once and for all but to redefine the context within which both the question and the answer become intelligible. Against a racist or ethnocentric self – which can emerge on either side of the opposition – it is necessary to emphasize the voice and claim of the Other, but what is emphasized is precisely the sharedness that invalidates and transcends both self and Other as arbitrary cultural constructs, as dangerous constructs of hatred and parochialism. For a critic who speaks for the non-Western Other, the task to find his or her independent voice must at the same time be a task to find the way to speak of our shared humanity, a shared perspective that transcends differences which make arbitrary distinction between the self and the Other. "We love over-emphasizing our little differences, our hatreds, and that is wrong." Let me end this essay with my favorite quote from Borges (1984:12): "If humanity is to be saved, we must focus on our affinities, the points of contact with all other human beings; by all means we must avoid accentuating our differences."

Notes

1. See Montaigne, "Of presumption" (1958, 2.17:481). All further references of Montaigne's *Essays* will be to this edition and will be included in the text with Book, Chapter, and page numbers.
2. This is not the place to comment on Todorov's major work on the colonized

Other – *The Conquest of America: The Question of the Other* (1984), but in that book, Todorov cannot be said to have given the Other its due. "Despite Todorov's claim to have engaged in a dialogue with the Other (and to have expressed a neutral acceptance of difference and a recognition of equality)," as one reviewer argues, "in *The Conquest of America* the voice of the 'Other' is evoked only to be, again, silenced" (Root, 1988:219).

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